

Introduction

Part of the significance of the figure of the martyr in the Middle East is without doubt its long tradition. Not only can it be traced back to the early days of Islam, but it developed out of interaction with older religious and cultural traditions. Martyrdom belongs to the terms and concepts of religion in general, especially the monotheist religions and here in particular Christianity. The Greek term “martyrs”, taken from the judicial sphere and used in the sense of “blood witness”, was coined during the persecution of the Christians in the second century CE. In Islamic history – at least with regard to majority Sunni Islam – readiness to engage in combat became more essential than readiness to suffer due to the different historical situation and subsequent development, beginning with the emigration of the early Muslim community to Medina. For this reason the most influential *shahīd* (again a term denominating the witness in the judicial sphere) became the figure of the fallen fighter, even though anybody dying an untimely death, whether from natural disasters or epidemic diseases, as well as victims of violence, is also considered a martyr. Whereas in Sunni Islam a fully-fledged martyr cult did not develop before the onset of modernity, the case is different with Shiite Islam, in which Ḥusayn’s martyrdom is the pivotal theme.

The respective religious scholars and authorities provide more or less normative definitions as to who is to be regarded as a martyr. But as history has shown, not only the veneration and commemoration of martyrs fails to hold to the line laid out by religious authorities; rather, martyrdom is a highly contested field within the respective religions as well. The historicity of normative concepts is furthermore linked to the competitive position vis-à-vis other religions. As paradigmatic examples for others, the place assigned to the martyrs is the very center of their communities; for that however, they also act in the border areas running between different religions and cultures. As such, martyr figures are not only agents of demarcation but at the same time of entanglement and mediation. This mediation occurs not only synchronously between different religious and cultural traditions but also diachronically between different eras which are, supposedly at least, to be clearly delimited from one another. The hybrid figure of the martyr calls into question the demarcations between pre-modern and modern as well as those between religion and the secular.

The prominent place the martyr occupies in conflicts of modern times is often described as a “recurrence of martyrs”, and perceived as a “backslide” into a pre-modern way of thinking. However, not only have the historical and political circumstances changed due to the modern developments of industrialisation, colonialism and nation-state building, but with the advent of mass media and new techniques of image production the media conditions for the ‘making of martyrs’ have also altered. Hence, the inclusion of traditional cultic, legal or narrative ele-

ments into current discourses on martyrdom can be described more aptly as adaptations or re-stagings. Rhetoric and iconographic forms derived from the religious tradition are re-envisioned or gain a modified function in the respective contexts.

These developments and transformations of the concept, the historic manifestations and the cultural specifics of the martyr figure, lie in the field of interest of cultural studies. In research on martyrdom from this perspective there are no “true” or “false” martyrs but events regarded as martyrdom and individuals seen by their respective communities as martyrs insofar as they are accorded some kind of commemoration or veneration that relates to their death as having taken place for a cause – irrespective of whether it is religious cause. Martyrdom is a powerful concept in part because it can bestow meaning upon a violent and unnatural death. Sometimes there are people who consider themselves martyrs prior to their deaths and who take particular discursive actions designed to prompt their posthumous veneration. Martyrdom can thus be described as a cultural practice and pattern of interpretation, which belongs to the sphere of religion but cannot be fully understood in exclusively religious terms. The role of religion is even more sophisticated in modernity, where we have pointedly secular communities and movements in which martyr figures nonetheless play an important role. Religion, however, not only keeps ready at hand concepts, images and ritual forms on which the martyr cult draws, but at the same offers a critique of ‘illegitimate’ martyrdom which can be used – at least potentially – to keep the phenomenon of martyrdom in check.

The present volume assembles the revised presentations given at the workshop “Traditions of Martyrdom in the Modern Middle East” as well as some additional contributions. It brings together contributions from different academic perspectives (religious and Islamic studies, literary and theatre studies, theology, sociology and history) on modern manifestations of martyrdom in diverse Middle Eastern religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity and the Bahā’ī Faith. The latter is considered in some detail since it is often underrepresented in comparative studies on the monotheistic religions. The workshop was conducted at the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies (Berlin) in cooperation with the Free University Berlin in October 2011 and was part of the research project “Figurations of the Martyr in Near Eastern and European Literature” sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG), a project conducted under the direction of Sigrid Weigel (Center for Literary and Cultural Studies) and Angelika Neuwirth (Free University Berlin) since 2005. We would like to thank our colleagues at the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies for their inspiration, which informed a variety of aspects, and the participants for their readiness to contribute to the workshop and the volume. We also wish to express our appreciation to the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies for providing the funds for the publication of this volume. Furthermore, we owe gratitude to Paul Bowman for proofreading the English, Sarah Anne Rennick for proofreading the article by Alice Bombardier, Jean Sinico for proofreading the

last article, as well as Shahin Misbah for providing the transcription of some Iran-related articles of this volume.

The transliteration of Arabic and Persian terms and names is based on the system for Arabic of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG), with a number of changes due to the English usage of Arabic words (th, j, kh, dh, sh, and gh instead of *ṭ, ḡ, ḥ, ḏ, ṣ, and ḡ*). The four additional Persian letters are transliterated according to the system for Persian of the DMG. Word endings (such as *tā' marbūṭa* or the *nisba* ending) of Arabic terms used within an Iranian context, have been transliterated according to the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES). Moreover the Arabic article is not assimilated. Names of present prominent figures, authors, artists, organisations and well-known places are in most cases not transliterated, but rendered as they appear in English (or French) bibliographical references and literature. The same applies to terms which are lexicalised in the English language (like Imam, sharia, jihad, Koran, Shiite etc.). A certain inconsistency was unavoidable however, but we trust that this will not bother the patient expert who in any case knows the Arabic and Persian form. Dates are in many cases supplied in both forms, the first being the Hijri year and the second the Christian or Common Era year. Where only one date is given it is according the Common Era.

I. Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith

The Bahā'ī Faith is in itself inextricably linked to modernity as Sasha Dehghani shows in his contribution. Not only did it develop in the modern age, but it responds in its teachings to some of the major questions of modernity such as the claims of science, world peace and women's rights. Whereas a host of transformative elements results from these links to modernity, among them the abolishment of military jihad, elements of continuity can be found in the concept of martyrdom which has its prototype in early Christianity and mystical Islam.

From mystical Islam stems the ideal of servanthood, which is preferred over a concept of martyrdom that includes physical death. Per-Olof Åkerdahl discusses the aspect of servanthood and also considers the ideological motivations for the persecution of the Bahā'īs in different socio-historical circumstances.

Moojan Momen concentrates on the time after the Islamic Revolution in Iran and discusses two opposed models of martyrdom, that of the ruling elite and that of the Bahā'ī community. He shows that the Bahā'ī martyrdom narrative is closer to the traditional Shiite martyrdom narrative, whereas the modern Shiite martyrdom narrative, designed to keep alive the revolutionary spirit, departs in significant ways from Shiite tradition.

II. *Witnessing and Sacrifice:*

Theological and Philosophical Implications of Martyrdom

Angelika Neuwirth's contribution considers paradigmatic differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam apparent in their respective – elaborated or missing – narratives of sacrifice. In Sunni Islam only a rudimentary sacrificial paradigm developed because of its de-mythologizing tendency; this changed, however, in the 20th century, especially in Palestine, where in reaction to the loss of land a modern myth of martyrdom was created drawing from different religious traditions, nationalist culture and mystic love poetry.

The concept of witnessing is at the centre of Joachim Negel's theological considerations. In the face of the hybrid phenomena addressed as martyrdom, he presents normative criteria for the Christian concept of witnessing and considers a modern incident of martyrdom where he finds these criteria manifested in an ideal way. Inquiring into the existential dimension, he argues for an irreducible meaning of witnessing: the reasons for the readiness for death coincide with the reasons for life.

The question of what it is worth dying for is addressed from a different perspective by Faisal Devji, who starts from the intriguing observation that both Muslim extremists and Ghandi argue that they love death more than life. While they refer, of course, to antithetic actions, the underlying concepts of sacrifice share a critique of the modern concept of humanity and human rights. Whereas the element of murder lends the sacrificial act an instrumental quality, it is not a means to some end but an act of sovereignty in itself in the case of nonviolent suffering promoted by Ghandi.

III. *Visual Representations: Ritual, the Arts and New Media*

Ta'ziyih is the 400-year-old ritualised theatrical performance commemorating the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and his family in Iran, practised until today. Maryam Palizban elucidates the features of *ta'ziyih*, the mythological traditions and rituals it draws on and focuses on the distinctive performative processes which affect not only the protagonists but also the audience during the re-enactment of a historical martyrdom.

Alice Bombardier shows how the blending of modern revolutionary Shiite ideology and the old mystical notion of the Perfect Man affects the work of revolutionary Iranian painters as well as their self-conception as artists. In paintings praising martyrdom from the 1980s a parallel is drawn between the process of martyrdom and the spiritual ascent to the model of the Perfect Man.

The Jihadist martyr cult flourishing in contemporary media is the topic of Silvia Horsch's contribution. She focuses on how the two dimensions of salvation, personal and collective, which are central in the thought 'Abdallāh 'Azzām, the

main ideologue of Jihadism, are addressed and put into images. Not only these visual elements, but indeed the Jihadist martyr concept itself, can be described as an amalgamation of classical Islamic traditions and modern discourses.

IV. Political Action and Ideological Discourse

The notion of martyrdom in Islam underwent a number of changes in modernity, as Farhad Khosrokhavar explicates in his contribution. It was turned into a means for generating revolutionary (mass) mobilisation, which has often been violent, but it has also occurred in a nonviolent fashion. The ‘Arab spring’ was accompanied by numerous incidents of nonviolent martyrdom, which he analyses according to different paradigms.

Lisa Franke considers the dimension of gender in martyrdom with regard to the figure of the “self-sacrificer” (*istishbādī*) or “suicide bomber”. She analyses how the female *istishbādiyyāt* of the Second Intifada are integrated into the Palestinian discourse on martyrdom, in which ways its distinctive religious and nationalist elements are applied to them and whether the gender relations in society are affected.

Silvia Horsch considers the global circulation and transformation of two extreme martyrdom practices – self-immolation and suicide bombing – and the accompanying discourse about them as well as the nonviolent martyrs of the Iranian (2009) and Arab (2010/2011) uprisings. Here the focus lies on the relation of religious and secular aspects in the practices and the accompanying discourses, which is a complex one inasmuch martyr figures tend to question the distinction drawn between the secular and the religious.

Sasha Dehbani / Silvia Horsch

